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Soviets Expected To Goad Syrians Into Air Battle

Intelligence sources believe the Kremlin will try to goad its Syrian clients into another air battle with Israel sometime soon, whether the Syrians like the idea or not.

The Russians' hope of provoking a Syrian-Israeli clash has nothing to do with politics, ideology or Middle East strategy; it's a matter of military necessity. The Soviet high command desperately needs to know whether the latest surface-to-air (SAM) missile systems it has deployed in Syria are vulnerable to Israeli pilots in their American-made aircraft. The Israelis easily knocked out the earlier SAM missiles that Syria placed in Lebanon.

The ease with which the Israeli planes eliminated some of the Russians' most advanced missile batteries has the Soviet generals scared. They face the appalling possibility that the SAM missiles, on which their entire tactical military doctrine depends, are obsolete as fast as they roll off the assembly line.

This behind-the-scenes intelligence story has not been told before. It was given to my associate Dale Van Atta over a period of months by

intelligence sources, who showed him top-secret documents.

The action began in spectacular fashion on June 9 and 10, when Israeli jets destroyed 19 Soviet-made SA6 batteries in the Bekaa Valley of southeastern Lebanon without losing a single plane. This astounding military feat was all the more impressive when it is remembered that these Syrian missiles had inflicted terrible punishment on the Israeli air force in the 1973 war.

What had happened in the intervening nine years? The Israelis had developed a variety of techniques and weapons, including a decoy drone called the Scout and radar-jamming "chaff," which confused or blinded the Syrian missile crews for three minutes, long enough for Israeli planes to destroy them.

Needless to say, the Syrians were stunned. So were the Russians.

The Kremlin sent its No. 2 air defense expert to Lebanon to find out what had gone wrong. He ordered the Syrians to deploy an even more advanced SAM system, the SA8. And this time, Soviet advisers would be directly involved, coordinating the defense and even manning the controls.

The SA8's radar is much more sophisticated than the SA6's; the Russians were fairly sure the Israelis' electronic countermeasures wouldn't work.

But on July 24 the Israelis knocked out the SA8 batteries, los-

ing only one F4 fighter in the process. Intelligence sources have learned that the battery that shot down the lone plane was manned by Soviet advisers, not Syrians.

In fact, when the Israelis sent planes back in to pulverize the F4 wreckage and keep its secret gear out of enemy hands, they killed a dozen Soviet technicians, who were already poring over the downed plane.

Understandably shaken by the failure of their missiles up against American technology and Israeli skill, the Soviets rolled out their super-hotshot SA9, and shipped in more Soviet advisers to man them. The Israeli air force dispatched the new missiles in strikes on Aug. 10 and Sept. 8.

To appreciate the alarm that these humiliating defeats caused in the Kremlin, it should be emphasized that the Soviets have assumed for years that their huge numbers of SAM missiles would be the backbone of their air defense system.

Now the Russians have deployed updated SA5 missiles in Syria, the first time any have been sent outside the Soviet Union.

But will the SA5s perform any better than the SA6s, 8s and 9s? The Kremlin doesn't know, but it wants to find out. This test is so important, in the opinion of U.S. analysts, that the Soviets will precipitate a Syrian-Israeli clash.